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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the restructuring efforts and activities undertaken in Virginia Beach from 1991 to 1994. The district has begun a massive effort to downsize, reorganize, and restructure the organization to focus on shared decision making and student performance. A special effort has been made to build coalitions among employees, with the school board, and with community groups. The district has also worked toward creating a new school culture, which entails the following elements: having a common sense of purpose; taking responsibility for achieving the vision; creating culture through events; and implementing systemwide staff development. Other district initiatives include the development of high, clearly defined expectations for student conduct, the creation of a Literacy Center, and administration of an annual Parent Perception Survey. (LMI)

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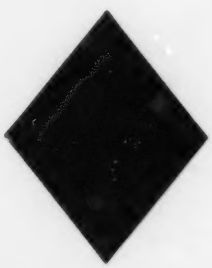
ASCD Annual Conference 1994

SESSION #2429

New Leaders at Work: Building Coalitions and Creating Community



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Saturday, March 18, 1994 ◆ 1:00 - 4:00 p.m.
Palmer House Hilton ◆ 7th Floor, LaSalle I

EA 026 060

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Listen, Learn, Then Lead

Listen,

Learn,

Then

Lead

Good Afternoon.

My topic today is "Listen, Learn, Then Lead." This title is meant to express the idea that building coalitions and creating a sense of community is most often conveyed through the old-fashioned strategies of listening and learning as prerequisites to leading.

Let me begin by giving you a picture of Virginia Beach, so that you can visualize the setting for what follows.

Virginia Beach is a young city, just 30 years old, not one of your quaint, historic Virginia towns. This "young" atmosphere makes it seem like California—active, eager to make life what the citizens want it to be instead of what it always has been, and often caught in the crossfire between real estate developers and environmentalists. What this means is that "building coalitions and creating community" are basic needs in Virginia Beach. Those needs are particularly intense in the school system, as I'll describe in a moment.

It's a well-kept secret, but Virginia Beach is Virginia's second largest city, with a population of 410,000. The city covers a territory of 250 square miles, 50 square miles of which are water—and that counts only the rivers, canals, and lakes, not the Chesapeake Bay nor the Atlantic Ocean.

The city encompasses neighborhoods that could be called "inner-city" as well as prime real estate developments and considerable farmland still entirely devoted to serious agriculture. Of course, tourism is our major enterprise, and I urge you to put our beaches on your vacation itinerary. Virginia Beach offers wonderful sand and sea and a host of family entertainment options. Come on down—you'll love it! End of commercial.

The school system enrolls about 75,000 students and employs about 8,500 employees. Minority students comprise about 25 percent of the total and are widely scattered among the neighborhoods, so that we have only one or two schools where the minority are the majority.

Listen,

Learn,

Then

Lead

Challenges to Schools

Now that you have the scene in mind, let me explain why the need for building coalitions and creating community suddenly became a matter of survival—at least for superintendents.

When I became superintendent in 1991, the School Board and I faced several challenges. Virginia Beach schools had enjoyed a long and stable superintendency and had cemented a reputation for academic excellence and good schools.

The stability ended, however, with that superintendent's retirement and was followed by a revolving-door superintendency where three superintendents began their work and then left after one year for various unsavory reasons. So I became the fifth superintendent in as many years.

What's more, the superintendent just before me had initiated sweeping top-down changes in curriculum and instruction, changes that had infuriated the teachers. They had had very little involvement in making curriculum decisions. Eventually their resentments toppled the superintendent.

Relationships in the schools had become very guarded. Everyone was on edge, and the atmosphere within schools was often not welcoming to parents and citizens. The school division was, quite frankly, in a situation more chaotic than it ever had been before.

At the same time, the School Board was recognizing some hard, cold facts of life. The reputation of the system was at stake, the revolving door and the teachers' resentments had created suspicion. Public confidence in the schools, especially among community leaders, was ebbing. The School Board was fully aware that the excellent reputation of Virginia Beach schools was a quality-of-life factor highly touted by the City's economic development officials in their efforts to recruit new businesses to locate in Virginia Beach.

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Challenges to Schools

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Listen,

Learn,

Then

Lead

And, of course, the matter of attracting new businesses to our city was at the top of everyone's list because we were also looking at military downsizing, slowed economic growth, an increasing number of minority and low-income families with high demand for services, and intense competition for funds within the city's budget. And we were looking at a central office that was still reeling from the revolving-door superintendency and sometimes extremely defensive in its responses to parents and citizens.

Our response has been a massive effort to downsize, reorganize, and restructure the organization to focus on shared decision making and student performance—indeed, on first-class performance from everyone.

As you can imagine, downsizing in the midst of rebuilding public confidence in schools is no fun. But if we are to create a truly responsive human services organization, we have to help people put the past behind them and make it possible for them to come to grips with change and to participate in growing the new culture of the organization. We have to let the benefits of ownership and shared decision making outweigh nostalgia for the past. And that means, from my perspective, balancing the challenge of change with support for change—a "tough-love" style of administration. To make progress in such a cultural shift, administrators must build coalitions of broad support within the system and within the community.

Building Coalitions

Listen,

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Building coalitions means, first and foremost, building relationships. This takes time, and it takes informal communication. Building relationships begins with the internal audience—school employees. It's necessary to spend time with employees and to hear their opinions and ideas about any issues they see.

Communicating With Employees

As indicated by the chaotic situation in the schools, the place for me to begin was the employee group whose needs for communication were of the utmost importance—the teachers. Feelings of cynicism and resentment characterized the attitudes of teachers, specialists, librarians, and counselors. The former superintendent had forced so many decisions upon them, and they had resisted these decisions so forcefully, that their suspicions were at an all-time high.

So I launched the "Superintendent's Communications Plan," a citywide effort to give all employees a forum for expressing their concerns and getting answers to their questions. This was where the slogan, "Listen, learn, and lead" first came to the surface. Because of the critical importance of their work and their morale, I met with the teachers—who are after all the people on whom the system's success depends—to ensure they had access to me and to ensure that I knew what issues were really important to them. Since I could not meet with all groups, other administrators accepted the responsibility of meeting with secretaries, school nurses, bus drivers, instructional coordinators, and teacher assistants.

You might say that I listened to a lot I'd rather not know and learned a lot I didn't want to know. Just the same, listening to employees is a reliable way to get the real scoop on issues within the schools. Once in a while one of my staff would travel to these meetings with me. It was fairly common after these experiences for the staffer to question my sanity.

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Communicating With Employees

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Why would I sit through four of these sessions per month for three or four hours at a time and let teachers beat up on me? Why, indeed?

Listen,

Learn,

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Because the frustrations of people in the front lines give a superintendent information he or she will never get in documents or administrative reports. Because in face-to-face communication, you get facial expressions and voice tones as well as the words. In a group, you can float ideas and take the pulse of the group as they respond. You can provide accurate information where rumor and fear have prevailed. You can reassure employees that you care about them, you care about their work, you care about student learning and performance. *And because you cannot achieve this kind of two-way face-to-face communication by any other means.*

Largely because of this effort, I was able to solve several immediate problems faced by people on the front lines, such as providing updated copiers for their use, and to reassure them that I was not going to make top-down decisions about curriculum. In fact, was going to challenge them to take part in school planning councils in governing their own schools, making their own decisions about instruction, and setting their own targets for school improvement.

Working with the School Board

Listen,

Learn,

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Lead

In a way, the teachers' cluster groups required the same kind of communications efforts that superintendents usually reserve for School Board members. Everyone knows that working with School Boards is the most important function of superintendents—unless they like redoing their resumes.

The similarity of communicating with employees' cluster groups and with the School Board can be expressed in the "listen, learn, and lead" slogan. A School Board is always comprised of diverse personalities and perspectives. A superintendent must listen and learn a lot before he or she can lead a little. Interestingly enough, that cycle of listen-learn-lead never ends.

It's easy to see how the process of selecting a new superintendent is beneficial. In the process of selection, both the superintendent and the School Board will have studied each other and studied the situation. The choice of one candidate will represent a collective decision—a consensus—where both parties have defined what they want from the transaction. The moment of hiring represents a common commitment. That gives the new superintendent momentum and a strong foundation for beginning to create solutions to existing problems.

To continue the benefits of coming to consensus about problems and solutions, the superintendent and School Board must continue the mode of studying the situation and each other, never taking anything for granted, especially as School Board members and School Board priorities change.

Listen,

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Building Relationships with Community Groups

Let me also allude to the process of communicating and building relationships with the many community groups you find in such a large and diverse city. In general terms, it has been critically important in Virginia Beach to build relationships with the business/military community, the civic and church organizations, and parent groups, particularly the PTA.

Please keep in mind that the principals have been organizing school planning councils. That's another story. Their efforts have concentrated on the needs and nuances surrounding their schools. Naturally, they have also pursued building relationships and creating new governance structures and a renewed sense of community for their schools.

Please keep in mind, also, that in a city as large as Virginia Beach, many educators are helping to build relationships with community groups. Many speak to civic clubs and church groups, many serve on committees and boards, many chatter in supermarket lines and at oceanfront events. Many have active roles in cooperative efforts, such as parenting conferences jointly sponsored by the school system and the PTA, or serve on systemwide committees, for planning our multicultural events and reviewing curriculum on the School Board's rigorous programs committee.

As experienced practitioners, you no doubt find these elements of building relationships very familiar and not exactly news. There is one area where we may have a little news to share—we have undertaken a major review of volunteer programs in the direction of establishing a "structured volunteer program."

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Listen,

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Building Relationships with Community Groups

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The situation is that we have more than 250 school partnerships with various businesses and military units; in addition, we have a myriad of volunteer programs, some quite well organized such as the PTA programs, and others rather loosely administered and often individually designed. The structuring of volunteer programs, to begin with, means taking stock of all these initiatives, providing orientation and training for both volunteers and educators, and shaping programs to make certain that they pay off in increased student learning, not just in the distribution of fast food coupons.

A year from now I expect to be able to share with you the results of this effort. My expectations are that school relationships with the community will be immeasurably strengthened and enriched and that support for schools and confidence in them will take another upswing in Virginia Beach.

Creating Community

Now, if a superintendent is building coalitions on the one hand, on the other hand, he or she must be able to capitalize on them to repair the distrust and resentments of the past and create the sense of community that will enable the organization to become the responsive human services organization it is capable of becoming—to achieve the renewed vision of successful schools. The ability to create the new culture is based on the careful cultivation of relationships and coalitions, but relationships alone will not create a new culture.

Listen,

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Lead

A Common Sense of Purpose

To move a school system forward, employees and patrons alike respond favorably to a common sense of purpose—a renewed vision of the success of their schools and their importance in achieving that success.

Let me briefly describe a few strategies for creating the sense of community, which I'd like to define here. First, it means having a common vision or sense of purpose, and not just a paragraph somewhere of lofty language to tip your hat to.

No, it's more than vision statements. Having a common sense of purpose means arriving at a common understanding of the assumptions underlying the renewed vision. For example, educators are now stating publicly that all children can, or even will, learn. This is a different assumption from the old one that insisted on winners and losers along the normal curve. Another assumption I've been clear about is that the purpose of schools is learning and that, therefore, we have to take the steps that ensure schools are safe and secure for learning. Learning comes first.

The sense of community also includes taking responsibility for achieving the vision, which I often state as "taking responsibility for results." The entire idea of taking responsibility reflects a can-do attitude, and a can-do attitude means everyone gives up the luxury of blaming others and gets busy solving problems.

Taking responsibility stems from the feeling that you belong to this place, this community, or this organization. That's why, last but not least, creating a sense of community involves a sense of place. That's one reason I opened my remarks with a brief picture of Virginia Beach. Families live at "the Beach" for a number of reasons, most of which translate to "It's a great place to live!" They like the oceanfront, or the contrasts of beach and farm and city, or they have roots here from military assignments or tourism business ventures. Whatever the particulars, the sense of place is a perennial part of a strong sense of community.

Creating Culture through Events

Listen,

Learn,

Then

Lead

It's necessary, when you're endeavoring to build a productive workplace on the ashes of the past, to communicate the new spirit through events that symbolize the renewed vision and the common purpose. Let me share three examples.

First, to symbolize the new vision, we held a ceremony in front of the school administration building. Called "Burying Bureaucracy," this event recognized the often stiff and unfriendly responses of the administration to parents, teachers, and citizens. We made a celebration out of it and incorporated humor into it so that people would understand it was the *unfriendliness* we were burying and not the people themselves. Symbolically, we put the old bureaucratic habits behind us and moved on to learning about customer service and user-friendly attitudes.

The All-Employee Convocation at the beginning of the school year was another event where I attempted to display a major break with the past and a reorientation to the new vision. In the past, this event was associated with resentment on the part of employees. It was always mandatory and solemn.

Based on what I learned from the cluster groups, we completely revamped Convocation. We made it a back-to-school party, completely voluntary. Now it's a festive event, only one hour for the program, and time for refreshments, reunions with colleagues, and student and faculty musical performances. Now the message for employees is "Come and celebrate the beginning of school with your friends and family."

At Convocation every September, I take advantage of the occasion to share with those who choose to attend—and not everyone chooses to attend, and that's the way it should be—a renewed message of purpose, vision, and priorities for the year.

The sad truth, of course, is that a superintendent can't be everywhere, can't talk to everyone face to face. But it is always a good idea for a superintendent to listen to and learn from a variety of groups. Recently, we began a series of superintendent's coffee breaks in the central administration building. It's hard on me, because I don't drink coffee, but it gives me a chance to build relationships and demonstrate my accessibility to employees. And that's certainly part of the message.

Listen,

Learn,

Then

Lead

Calling on Staff Development

A few minutes ago I mentioned putting old bureaucratic habits behind us and moving forward to user-friendly and customer service practices. The major vehicle for accomplishing this cultural change, in addition to statements of purpose from the superintendent and School Board, is staff development. How else are we to teach and learn new ways of thinking and doing? It's staff development that turns the rhetoric of leadership into reality.

We've changed our staff development office into a brokering system, as we've moved staff development decisions for school improvement to the schools. We still have far-reaching staff development needs systemwide, of course; but for services to schools, the staff development office functions as a source of qualified providers of training, maintaining a database of names and subjects for sharing with school planning councils as they define improvement targets and seek training accordingly.

Let me give you three examples of systemwide staff development to illustrate our approach there. First, we've begun an internal Academy of Leadership and Learning. Its mission is twofold: to encourage leadership development among prospective administrators and to spread leadership training among all levels and classes of employees. The first purpose is fairly well known among educators. I'd like to elaborate further on the second purpose and how it is playing out in reality.

Two examples of spreading leadership training among employees will suffice. This year we identified our own internal customer service team, drawn from all levels and classes of employees, who were selected because they exhibited remarkable growth in and talent for customer service, based on their natural inclinations and the earliest rounds of staff development from qualified providers. This team is in the midst of developing leadership training in customer service. Their plans call for the availability of this training for

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Calling on Staff Development

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all employees for several years. We feel that the early rounds of training—and the natural talents of these talented employees—have paid off handsomely in what we are now going to be able to provide for all employees.

Listen,

Learn,

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Lead

The second example is a sort of long stretch. A discharged employee made a formal complaint of racism in the office where he had worked as the cause of his dismissal. An independent investigation has exonerated the office of the charge but revealed cronyism and a great deal of bickering in the workplace. I have insisted upon human relations and diversity training for everyone in that office, for my position is firmly and assertively against racist and sexist practices.

Here's the interesting part. As this group of employees has grappled with their feelings of humiliation and resentment and with my mandate that they must undergo training, new understandings have emerged among the employees, their supervisors, and the staff development office. Based on these new understandings of the human relations problems in the workplace, their training will include diversity training, updates on the law, updates on School Board policy, and leadership training in the form of management strategies, supervisory methods, and communications. Is this surprising? It was a little surprising to me, but I guess it shouldn't have been. We had never provided supervisory training nor management strategies to the bus garage before!

Listen,

Learn,

Then

Lead

Bold Initiatives, Success

In creating a renewed sense of community, nothing succeeds like success. Taking risks and seeing those risks pay off in substantive improvements reinforces a can-do attitude and restores confidence in self and others. Pretty soon both the internal and the external patrons of the schools are seeing they can achieve the renewed vision, can accomplish the purposes of schools, and can rely on public education to produce literate, productive citizens for the nation.

Three initiatives will illustrate my point. First, we have in place a discipline plan called Traditional Discipline, which is anchored in School Board policy. The heart of the plan is our *Code of Student Conduct*, which every September, is formatted into a booklet and sent home with every student. The *Code of Student Conduct* spells out the rights and responsibilities of everyone in school, the adults as well as the students.

The idea is that the student and the parents will go over the booklet and will understand the school's expectations for behavior. This plan is widely acclaimed in the community and with the teachers, at least until one's own child is disciplined accordingly, and then the plan suddenly becomes too harsh. Traditional discipline, nevertheless, ensures that our schools are safe and secure for learning.

Another bold initiative is our Literacy Center. Let me explain. The Commonwealth of Virginia requires that students pass three segments of its Literacy Passport Test in order to be classified ninth graders in regular high schools. In 1992, the first year of the requirement, we had about 130 youngsters who had failed—repeatedly—one segment or more of the Literacy Passport Test.

Contrary to all conventional wisdom, we promptly and hurriedly organized The Literacy Center, an alternative school where these youngsters could receive intensive and individualized instruction, self-esteem and self-management training, motivational events and field trips, and an environment of acceptance and nurturing complemented with high demands for performance.

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Bold Initiatives, Success

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Listen,

Learn,

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Lead

The result is that, in its first year of operation, students at The Literacy Center achieved a 95 percent pass rate, and most returned to their regular high schools with enough credits to become tenth graders, usually with one summer in summer school. The Literacy Center staff followed these youngsters this year to provide the support and mentoring they still need to ensure their continued academic success in high school. The staff are also presenting a session at this Conference, Session 4123 on Monday, if you're interested.

Another bold initiative I'm proud of is our Parent Perception Survey. This year's questionnaire will be mailed to about 80,000 homes in Virginia Beach; its purpose is to ask parents, "How'm I doing, teaching your child?" Parents don't always know what is actually happening in classrooms, but they always have perceptions. Those perceptions are a fertile source of feedback to teachers who want to improve their performance in the eyes of their customers—the parents. We have to listen to parents to learn from them.

The remarkable thing about this survey is that it is completely teacher-planned and all voluntary. It began with a group of teachers discussing the application of customer service concepts to schools. It moved forward with a large group called the Client Evaluation Task Force, with the help of a research professor from the University of Virginic and Laura Ostrander, our own Educational Planning Center liaison, who is also presenting a session at this Conference, Session #4225 on Monday.

The field test last year was very encouraging. Individual teacher results were communicated to the teacher in complete confidentiality. Overall results were compiled at the University of Virginia and made available to the public. In general, we found that parents were favorably impressed with our teachers. Occasionally, we learned that one small bit of negative feedback was very hard for a teacher to take but often caused the teacher to reflect on practice and improve accordingly. Since we have 2,500 volunteers this year and 80,000 questionnaires about to be mailed, we are on pins and needles to get this year's results.

Challenges Ahead

Listen,

Learn,

Then

Lead

I wish I could tell you that all challenges have been met, all necessary relationships have been built, and the sense of community is all renewed and positive, leading us ever forward toward our vision. Well, that's true to a point, but schools face ever-changing priorities and new issues and concerns every day. It seems we will be forever committed to listen, learn, and then lead.

As I close, let me leave you with three emerging challenges. First, Virginia is the 50th state to begin to elect School Board members. In Virginia Beach, our first election will take place in May. We have a slate of 25 qualified candidates for the six available seats on the board. Six is the magic number that constitutes a majority on our 11-member board. See what I mean by new challenges? I am expecting a time of turmoil and confusion as the new board settles in place after the May election and learns to function as a School Board, where decisions must be made in the interests of all children and the entire community.

We are also facing issues of funding for housing and technology. Our Capital Improvement Program requests are large, expensive, and critical. We have as yet reached no decision as to whether we should try for a bond referendum. The situation is too uncertain at the moment.

And there are still the issues of stability and satisfaction within the system and confidence on the part of the public. Those remain high priorities for the School Board and me, despite the advance of other challenges.

Keeping people in tune with the vision and the common sense of purpose, building teams and coalitions along with personal and individual relationships, providing the tough-love balance of challenge and support—these are the day-to-day stuff of school administration in the 90s, the continual tasks of education's leaders.

INFORMAL COMMUNICATIONS • BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

SESSION #2429

New Leaders at Work: Building Coalitions and Creating Community

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Saturday, March 18, 1994, 1:00-4:00 p.m.
Palmer House Hilton, 7th Floor, LaSalle 1

Interactive Group #1:

- Connecting Schools to Customers
- Sidney L. Faucette, Superintendent
  Virginia Beach City Public Schools
  Virginia Beach, Virginia

INFORMAL COMMUNICATIONS • BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

1991-1992

- ***Community Survey***
  Ascertained community priorities for teaching and learning

- ***Indicators of Quality Committee/ School Performance Measures***
  "Blue-ribbon" community committee to select the various indicators of quality schooling

- ***Customer Service Cards***
  Introduction of practice of using follow-up response cards and surveys on the part of service staffs (school plant and technology services)

INFORMAL COMMUNICATIONS • BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

1992-1993

- ***Customer Service Training***
  Divisionwide and local school staff development in customer service

- ***Faculty Councils and School Planning Councils***
  Bylaws, meeting strategies and schedules, training begun

- ***The Parent Perception Survey Field Test***
  Teacher-led project to develop and field-test a survey asking parents to report their perceptions about the classroom practices of their child's teacher

INFORMAL COMMUNICATIONS • BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

1993-1994

- ***The Customer Service Team/Human Relations Training***
  Divisionwide development team creating training and the spirit of service for employees at all levels and in all schools and offices

- ***Individual School Satisfaction Surveys***
  Conducted to determine levels of satisfaction with their local school's performance

- ***The Parent Perception Survey***
  Teacher-led project to survey parents about their perceptions of the classroom practices of their child's teacher

1994-95 and beyond...

INFORMAL COMMUNICATIONS • BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

SESSION #2429

New Leaders at Work: Building Coalitions and Creating Community

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Saturday, March 18, 1994, 1:00-4:00 p.m.
Palmer House Hilton, 7th Floor, LaSalle 1

Interactive Group #2:

- The Role of School Board Initiatives in Restructuring

- Anne Meek, Assistant Superintendent
  Virginia Beach City Public Schools
  Virginia Beach, Virginia

INFORMAL COMMUNICATIONS • BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

1991-1992

- ***The Restructuring Resolution***
  Statement of intent to restructure the school system in the direction of school-based management and shared decision making

- ***The Superintendent's Restructuring Report***
  Defined restructuring as "effecting a change in school culture that allows decisions about learning to be shared with the stakeholders—practitioners, parents, pupils—to create improvement in schooling" and set forth the philosophical basis as well as outlined the major initiatives

- ***Community Survey***
  Ascertained community priorities for teaching and learning

- ***Indicators of Quality Committee/School Performance Measures***
  "Blue-ribbon" community committee to select the various indicators of quality schooling

INFORMAL COMMUNICATIONS • BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

1992-1993

- ***Traditional Discipline***
  Divisionwide committee plan with policy support and parental involvement; *Code of Student Conduct* distributed to all students

- ***The Literacy Center***
  Alternative school for students who, after failing one segment or more of the Virginia Literacy Passport Test, could not be classified ninth graders

- ***Faculty Councils and School Planning Councils***
  Bylaws, meeting strategies and schedules, training begun

- ***Mandatory Summer School***
  Program to require students in danger of academic failure (retention) to attend summer school to boost them into the next grade

- ***Students Aimed for Excellence (SAFE)***
  Paper reporting systemwide and/or school-based programs supporting students at risk

- ***Student-Centered Guidance***
  Pilot project designed to move counselors away from paperwork and ensure middle school and high school students the same level of guidance that el ementary students receive

INFORMAL COMMUNICATIONS • BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

1993-1994

- ***Mission and Goals***
  Established and renewed by School Board
- ***Schools of the Future Focus Questions and Strategies***
  Proposed to set direction
- ***Strategic Plan***
  Under revision to incorporate new mission statements, goals, and strategies
- ***Public Forums***
  A series of forums to inform the community and obtain feedback
- ***Rigorous Programs Committee***
  Community committee to review middle school and high school courses to ensure all courses are challenging and available to all students
- ***Magnet Schools Study Committee***
  Community committee to explore the feasibility of establishing one magnet school or more
- ***Parity/Technology Initiative***
  Referendum proposal for funding housing, modernization, equipment, and technology

1994-95 and beyond

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